

Marble Bar



For almost 80 years, the Marble Bar in Adams' Hotel held a very special place in the heart of Sydney's busy social life.

Sought out by Sydney men and visitors alike, the Marble Bar was the most popular meeting place in the city, and exclusively a bastion of male pride; only on very rare occasions were women permitted to cross the threshold to view the "riot of European marble, sumptuous marble fireplaces and Bacchanalian breasts", to quote George Adams' own words.

The Marble Bar was originally built in 1893, a remarkable monument to George Adams, the remarkable man who built it.

George Adams was the son of a farm labourer who brought his family to Australia in 1855. Young George spent his early years in his new country wandering from the Queensland goldfields to the sheepstations of outback New South Wales.

He finally settled down to buy a butcher's shop in rural Goulburn N.S.W., a business which prospered and enabled him to indulge his great passion for horseracing. He regularly attended country courses and very often the big city meetings in Sydney, where he became a well-known and popular figure.

In 1878, he purchased William O'Brien's Tattersall Hotel and immediately his name was attached to the modest hostelry . . . a small house with a few bedrooms and two bars.

The old-fashioned, unpretentious house for years had catered to racing enthusiasts from the town and the bush, and indeed had been Adams' home-away-from-home. Punters and bookies had met there to settle debts, debate the form, and organise amongst themselves regular small sweepstakes.

However, the new proprietor decided to run the sweeps himself, and before too long he opened them to an enthusiastic public.

Within a few years, with his profits from the hotel and his share of the sweepstakes, George Adams could call himself a rich man, and he invested much of his fortune in making his Adams Hotel the grandest, most elegant in Sydney.

After buying the adjoining property and extending through to George Street, he set about building the bar, which even today is recognised as the most beautiful bar in the Southern Hemisphere.

Prominent local architect, Varney Parkes, was commissioned to design the wondrous saloon. The walls and huge pillars were faced with marble of many hues, which came from Italy, the French Pyrenees, Belgium and North Africa. Italian specialists were brought to Sydney to instal the sumptuous marble.

The bar counters of carved, gleaming mahogany came from America. To adorn the walls, Adams commissioned Julian Ashton, one of the noted artists of the day, who painted the diaphanously-clad beauties to represent Autumn, Seeing, Touch and other similar subjects in the largest art commission in Australia at that time.

The total cost of building the Marble Bar, by the time it opened its doors in 1893, was £32,000.

When the Adams' Hotel was sold for the development of the Sydney Hilton complex, the welcome decision was made to dismantle and restore the Marble Bar, which had been classified a first-class national monument by the National Trust.

Experts moved in ahead of the wreckers, to carefully wash down the fine marble, X-ray each piece, and photograph each detail of the room in black and white and colour. Moulds were made of the ceiling and frieze plaster work so that these could be recast, and each small section was labelled to assist identification.

The Marble Bar came apart into about 5,000 pieces, each lovingly wrapped and stored until its new location was ready.

Under the master touch of artist Richard McDonald, of Balmain, the years of grime were scraped away from the original Julian Ashton paintings, and they were carefully restored to their former beauty. The stained glass ceilings and doors were meticulously cleaned, and the bosomy figures lining the bar counter were restored in every detail.

In July, 1973, the Sydney Hilton returned to Sydney its well-loved watering-hole.

It's not *exactly* the same as before . . . subtle air-conditioning replaces the earlier long-bladed fans, concealed lighting is there instead of the old shaded lamps, and drinkers now stand on carpet instead of tiled flooring.

A modestly priced smorgasbord attracts a new lunchtime crowd.

And old-timers are now heard to grumble about the presence of women in their all-male preserve. Julian Ashton's scantily clad ladies, considered too daring for the eyes of gentlewomen of another era, are now admired by a new generation of men and women alike.



SYDNEY HILTON



2024 image via Google Street View.